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SUBJECT: FRANCE: RACIST AND ANTI-SEMITIC ACTS UP SHARPLY IN 2004

1. (U) Summary: The National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (NCCHR) stated that racist and anti-Semitic incidents increased from 833 in 2003 to 1,565 in 2004. The 2004 figures eclipse the 1,313 acts registered in 2002 and represent the largest number of incidents recorded in a single year since the commission began tracking such statistics in 1990, according to NCCHR's annual report titled "The Fight Against Racism and Xenophobia," which was presented to the Prime Minister on March 22. The report indicates that racist incidents increased from 232 in 2003 to 595 in 2004 and anti-Semitic incidents rose from 601 to 970 over the same two years; however, the report noted that such incidents decreased dramatically in the fourth quarter of 2004 and hoped the trend would continue into 2005. End Summary.

Methodology

2. (U) The NCCHR -- an independent body in the Office of the Prime Minister, which has nongovernmental as well as governmental members -- admits that its numbers are not exhaustive and only reflect available statistics at a given time. Many acts may go unreported, and the motives of some may be reclassified at a later date. The commission also notes that these statistics do not include acts of discrimination. With these caveats, the NCCHR explains that it breaks down racist and anti-Semitic occurrences into two categories: "actions" and "threats." It classifies "actions" as acts against persons that require an ITT (authorization by a medical doctor for a person to miss work for a certain number of days based on severity of injury) or against "property presenting a degree of certain gravity." "Threats" include menacing words or gestures, graffiti, letters, pamphlets, offensive demonstrations, and other acts of intimidation.

Anti-Semitism

3. (U) The NCCHR reports that there were 970 anti-Semitic incidents registered in 2004, a steep increase over the 601 in 2003 and greater than the previous high of 932 in 2002. Of these occurrences, 200 were classified as actions and 770 as threats. Disturbingly, the number of anti-Semitic incidents occurring in schools nearly tripled. The report remarks that individuals of "Arab-Muslim background" comprised 104 of the 209 individuals questioned for anti-Semitic acts. The number of anti-Semitic incidents in recent years is significantly higher than those recorded during the 1990s, and the sharp up-tick beginning in 2000 has often been attributed to the Second Intifada, the war in Iraq, and other events in the Middle East. However, the report notes that 2004's increase does not correlate to current events and warns that "anti-Semitism is becoming established in a continuous and lasting manner."

Racism and Xenophobia

4. (U) The 595 racist acts (169 actions and 426 threats) recorded in 2004 represent an increase of more than 150% over the 232 committed in 2003. Many of these incidents took place on the island of Corsica, where separatist elements are blamed for xenophobic actions against immigrants, mostly of North African descent. On mainland France, the police attribute 44% of violent actions and 59% of threats to the extreme right. The report also notes an increase of 251% in the actions targeting Islam.

Re-emergence of the Extreme Right

5. (U) While responsible for 90% of the acts between 1994 and 1999, extreme right activity, as a percentage of occurrences, was 14% in 2002 and 18% in 2003. However, 2004 marked a resurgence in the extreme right, which was implicated in 30% of the racist and anti-Semitic incidents. The NCCHR noted a shift, remarking that right-wing elements seemed to be targeting individuals of Arab-Muslim background (292 acts) more often than those of Jewish origin (169 acts).

Desecrations

16. (U) In 2004, there were 65 attacks on Jewish (32) and Muslim (33) religious sites or cemeteries, desecrating 46 religious buildings and 485 graves, often with neo-Nazi slogans or symbols. These numbers are up from 44 in 2003. A quarter of these incidents took place in Alsace, which has historical and geographic ties to Germany, and the NCCHR posits that some of these desecrations may be linked to the 60th anniversary of World War II events.

Government Action

17. (U) The report praises the government's actions in the fight against racism and anti-Semitism, pointing to strong and clear political leadership and the implementation of concrete measures. Within the report, the Ministry of Interior states that there were 334 individuals arrested in 2004, 209 for anti-Semitic acts and 125 for racist and xenophobic acts. Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior sets forth three priorities for 2005 in the report: a mobilization of all government actors, with prefects putting into place security plans and mayors providing additional protections for religious sites and cemeteries; the further implementation of the recommendations of last summer's Rufin report; and the elimination of all groups that incite hatred and violence, including breaking up neo-Nazi groups and working with prefects and mayors to prevent hate groups from being able to meet. The Ministry of Justice indicates that 95% of the legally actionable anti-Semitic incidents were pursued. However, the NCCHR criticized the Justice Ministry for a lack of information on judicial proceedings regarding other forms of racism and commented that, despite adequate laws and sensitized judges and prosecutors, effectiveness in preventing racist and anti-Semitic incidents in 2004 was weak.

Comment

18. (SBU) The increase in racist and anti-Semitic incidents in France had been well-publicized throughout the year, and the dramatic rise in the number of incidents outlined in the 855-page report did not come as a surprise. The escalation is nonetheless worrying, particularly in light of intense GOF efforts to fight the trend, including legislation passed in recent years to increase penalties for hate crimes, expanded protection for religious sites and cemeteries, numerous tolerance and education programs, and vociferous denunciation at the highest political levels of racist and anti-Semitic acts. The French, to some degree, may be uncovering the problem because they are fighting it. The Minister of Interior points out that the rise in rates should be viewed in the context of the recent emphasis on fully recording all such events. In addition, the Ministry of Interior states, victims have become more likely to make acts known to authorities and heavy media attention has perpetuated a copycat phenomenon.

19. (SBU) Comment Continued: The report also ponders the paradox of rising incidents concurrent with national polls that show French society improving in several key areas, including becoming more sensitive to racism and anti-Semitism, supportive of measures to fight all forms of racism, and increasingly viewing immigrants as a "source of cultural enrichment." (There was a decrease, however, in those viewing Islam in a positive light.) The report does point to the significant decrease in racist and anti-Semitic acts in the last quarter of 2004, a trend that seems to be continuing into 2005. End Comment.

Wolff